

# Focus on the future: Long-term goals help us resist unhealthy urges

March 31 2009

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Imagine a delicious pile of French fries next to a low-fat green salad. After resisting the fries, can you really be expected to go to the gym instead of watching TV? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers who focus on long-term goals are more likely to resist unhealthy urges.

"Whether it's gobbling dessert, skipping a [workout](#), or failing to floss, consumers often let down their guard when they're faced with one health challenge after another," write authors Nidhi Agrawal (Northwestern University) and Echo Wen Wan (University of Hong Kong).

"If we are feeling fresh, it's easy to focus on our goals and exert self-control. But when we've already tested the limits of our self-control, it's harder to keep going," the authors explain. "This is when focusing on the big picture helps us to keep our eyes on the goal and push ourselves harder. In contrast, focusing on the immediate situation only emphasizes how we've already maximized the extent of our willpower and hinders self-control."

The researchers investigated how health messages affect self-control. In their studies, the authors examined the processes at work as people face repeated self-control challenges. They found that after people have already faced a self-control challenge, a focus on their lack of resources may prevent self-control in further health-related activities, such as exercising or flossing.

The authors found that participants showed less self-control on health tasks when they focused on their immediate situations. In contrast, when they looked to the future and linked the health task to important long-term goals, they exerted self-control and were not affected by being tired or depleted. (This was true even when participants were asked to read long medical articles.)

The authors believe their findings are important for anyone conveying health messages to consumers. For example, messages that stress risks can deplete consumers to the extent that they fall prey to bad decisions, like overeating, which can compromise health.

"To prevent such detrimental repercussions, advertisers and public health advocates should promote higher-level thinking when presenting high-risk health messages," the authors conclude.

More information: Nidhi Agrawal and Echo Wen Wan. "Winning the Battle for Self-Control: Look at Long-Term Goals." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): October 2009

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Focus on the future: Long-term goals help us resist unhealthy urges (2009, March 31) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-focus-future-long-term-goals-resist.html>

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